

# Karl Korsch: A Marxist Friend of Anarchism

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First appeared in *Red and Black* # 5, (Australia) April 1973

Karl Korsch (1886-1961), who is today being rediscovered by the "new left," was one of the major theoreticians of left communism. Of the three major theoreticians of 1920's Marxism - Gramsci, Lukacs and Korsch - Korsch is at once the one of most interest to anarchists and also, I believe, the superior Marxist.

Marxists of the 1920s have an interest for anarchists of a quite different order from those of any other period. The reason is that for a brief period after the First World War Marxism was a revolutionary doctrine in a way that it had not been since Marx nor has been again (leaving aside its use as an ideology of basically peasant nationalist revolutions.) In that brief period the Russian Revolution served as a rallying point for left-wing intellectuals of all shades of red and black, and these joined with anarchist workers and socialist workers of a syndicalist stamp to form the basis of the new parties of the Third International. Except in Spain, anarchist and syndicalist organizations everywhere lost ground to these new parties which rapidly evolved into bureaucratic state socialist organizations interested in the control of the working-class movement. During this evolution those anarchists, syndicalists and left socialists who held true to the initial promise of the Russian Revolution were isolated, weeded out and kept by the party's superior organization from the access to the working class that alone could sustain a revolutionary movement. Karl Korsch was one of the casualties of this process.

Although Gramsci had been a supporter of workers' councils, and in prison tended to associate with syndicalists, he did not become a left opponent of the Comintern. The reasons would seem to be that, firstly, the Italian problem was not revolution but defense against fascism; secondly, Gramsci was opposed to the abstract leftism of Bordiga who was connected with the German ultra-left; and thirdly, Gramsci's imprisonment kept him out of harm's way and isolated him from the convulsions of the international movement. The cases of Korsch and Lukacs are much clearer.

Lukacs was a member of a marginal bourgeois group (the Jewish intelligentsia) in a semi-feudal country (Hungary). Prior to 1917 his interests were primarily literary although he had been influenced by Szabo - an intellectual who took his syndicalism from Sorel. Not surprisingly his initial position as a

revolutionary was utopian and abstractly ultra-left; his later evolution to a "right-wing," almost social-democratic, position (Blum Theses 1929) was quite reasonable given that Hungary only ceased to be feudal in 1945. On the other hand his accommodation to Stalinism, however partial and "insincere" it is alleged to have been, is hard to forgive.

Korsch's knowledge of the workers' movement was, at the end of the war, of an altogether different order from Lukacs. Educated at several universities in economics, law, sociology and philosophy, he became a doctor of jurisprudence in 1911 and went to England where he joined the Fabian society and studied the syndicalist and Guild socialist movements. He was already opposed to the Marxist orthodoxy which defined socialism as the negation of capitalism by nationalization, saw the coming of socialism as inevitable and conceived Marxism as a pure "science" separate from the practice of the workers' movement. His opposition to this orthodoxy turned Korsch's attention to the Fabian's concern with the preparation of individuals for socialism through education and to the syndicalists' stress on the conscious activity of the workers as the basis both of the revolution and the management of a socialist economy. From his very earliest articles he stressed the role of consciousness in the struggle for socialism and the importance of working class self-activity. After the war he developed his ideas further by working out schemes for socialization coupled with workers' control.

At the beginning of the 1914-18 war Korsch was conscripted in the German army and went to the front, but he was against the war and, although wounded twice, never carried a gun himself. He welcomed the formation of the anti-war socialist movement and after the war joined the Independent Socialist Party (USPD). Still opposed to "orthodox" and "revisionist" Marxism, at that time he believed that a third current, "Practical socialism," was being formed and was represented by Luxemburg and Lenin. For this tendency the transition to socialism was a "conscious human act." Korsch became sufficiently Leninist by 1924 to see the revolutionary act as the act of a mass revolutionary party but he still saw the party as a means to an end of a direct democracy of workers' councils. Although he went with the majority of the USPD into the communist party (KPD) he argued against Moscow's twenty-one conditions of affiliation; in particular he opposed the demand for a parallel illegal organization which would be out of the control of the party masses.

Despite his reservations, Korsch rapidly rose to be a leader of the KPD. He became editor of the party journal and a deputy in the Reichstag. This he owed to his theoretical pre-eminence; for, although he had always rejected social-democratic "Marxism," he had been led in his legal studies to see society and the economy as the basis of legal systems and, during the brief liberation of Marxism

from orthodoxy his previous philosophical, sociological and economic studies served him well. However, this situation soon changed; after 1923 he was obviously on the left-wing of the KPD; in 1924 his 1923 book *Marxism and Philosophy* was denounced at the executive meeting of the communist international and he was removed from his editorial position in 1925; in 1926 he was excluded from the KPD. According to Mattick, Korsch always had a critical attitude to the emerging Russian state but in the early period of the Russian revolution, when all the forces of reaction were arrayed against it, he believed that a revolutionary had to support it. Furthermore, although the Russian revolution had to be a capitalist one, i.e., its mission was to develop capital and a proletariat in underdeveloped Russia, it still had a revolutionary significance if the break in -the world system could be extended westward into Germany. Once Russia had reached its accommodation with Germany and other capitalist powers and had turned the Communist International into a foreign instrument of its national purposes, a revolutionary had to break with Russia. Thus in 1926 he joined the "Resolute Left" - an ultra-left group opposed to the new Russian bureaucracy and its German ally, the KPD. Even earlier he had been in contact with Sapranov of the "Democratic Centralism" group within the Russian party who believed that the Russian proletariat should break with the Bolsheviks. (Korsch's views on these questions can be found in the article in French by Mattick. Very similar views are to be found in *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord in the section "The Proletariat as subject and as representation.")

Unfortunately Korsch's political articles on Bolshevism are not yet available in English (1). On the other hand we have most of his articles on Marxist theory and these make plain why the split had to occur. In his 1923 work *Marxism and Philosophy* Korsch claimed to be attempting to "restore" the correct Marxian position on this question in the same way, and for the same revolutionary purposes, as Lenin had restored the Marxist position on the state in *State and Revolution* (a pamphlet denounced as "anarchist" by the other Bolsheviks). In fact what he did was to show how Marxism had become an ideology of the workers' movement: for Korsch Marxism, whether in its pre-1848 "philosophical" form or its post-1848 "scientific" form, was neither a science nor a philosophy, it was either the theoretical consciousness of a proletarian revolutionary practice or it was a "Marxist" ideology unrelated to practice or, concealing a counter-revolutionary practice. All this was placed in the context of violent attack on the orthodox Marxism of Kautsky, and hence, said Korsch, was against the second International and for the third International. In saying these things, Korsch trampled on all that Marxist orthodoxy, German or Russian, social-democratic or Bolshevik, held dear.

In 1930 when Korsch returned to the question to write an anti-critique he was clear on what had happened. Unbeknown to him, he had been "guilty" of deviation

from the emerging Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy based on Kautsky and Plekhanov. Thus for the Russians there was a materialist Marxist philosophy (given in Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*) and also a Marxist science which, following Kautsky, had to be brought to the proletariat from outside by bourgeois intellectuals (as expounded in Lenin's *What is to be Done?*). Thus what Korsch had thought to be a new, third, current in Marxism was just a new ideological variant of the old Marxist orthodoxy. The special features of Bolshevism were merely a reflection of the special tasks which the ideology was to perform in undeveloped Russia. This discovery of the ideological nature of communist theory and the collapse of all revolutionary Marxist workers' movements in the face of counter-revolution implied a re-evaluation of Marxism.

For Korsch Marxist theory was the general expression of the existing revolutionary movement. In counter-revolutionary periods Marxism could be developed further in its scientific content but once Marxism was developed as a pure science separate from its connection with the proletarian movement it tended to become an ideology. Thus the link between theory and practice was not anything to do with the application of a science but meant simply that theory was the articulated consciousness of a practical revolutionary movement. To re-establish the link required the existence of a proletarian revolutionary movement and the purging of Marxism of all its ideological and bourgeois elements. The only movement which answered to the description in the Europe of the 1930's was the Spanish anarchist movement and so Korsch, while continuing his work on Marxist theory, also studied Bakunin and the anarchist movement.

In his 1923 work Korsch had stressed that early Marxism was a continuation in a new context of the revolutionary theory of the bourgeoisie, principally of the German idealist tradition. In his 1930 "Thesis on Hegel and the Revolution" he returned to this' question and re-evaluated both Hegelian and Marxist theory. Hegelian philosophy was not just the revolutionary philosophy of the bourgeoisie; it was the philosophy of the final phase of the bourgeois revolution and hence also a philosophy of the restoration. Thus the dialectical method is not the purely revolutionary principle that the Marxists imagined. Thus also the creation of a theory of the proletarian revolution on the basis of a "materialized" dialectic is only a transitional phase of the workers' movement. Marxism is not the theory of an independent proletarian revolution but the theory of a proletarian revolution as it develops out of the bourgeois revolution, and this theory shows its origins: it is still tainted with bourgeois revolutionary theory, that is to say with Jacobinism. This means that Marxist politics remain within the orbit of bourgeois politics. As Korsch said explicitly in his 1950 *Ten Theses on Marxism Today*, Marxism adheres unconditionally to the political forms of the bourgeois revolution. The break with

bourgeois politics has been carried through only by the anarchist and syndicalist movements, in the form of the break with politics as such.

Only these movements were still revolutionary in practice. For Korsch their importance was that they still maintained the ideal, everywhere else sacrificed, of class solidarity above immediate material interests and they based themselves on the self-activity of the working class as expressed in the principle of direct action.

When, the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Korsch supported the CNT militants' attempts to introduce workers' management in opposition to the political line of the right-wing socialists, Stalinists and bourgeois republicans. This development to a syndicalist as opposed to orthodoxy Marxist socialist position went parallel to a re-interpretation of Marxism.

Although Korsch remained a Marxist his view of Marxism became increasingly critical. By 1960 he had completely rejected Marxism as the only theory of the proletarian revolution and had made Marx one, among others, of the numerous 11 precursors, founders and developers of the workers' socialist movement. In 1961 he was working on a study of Bakunin and believed then that the basis of the revolutionary attitude in the modern bourgeois epoch would be an ethic Marx would have rejected as "anarchist." In his 1950 *Ten Theses* he also criticized Marxism's overestimation of the state as an instrument of social revolution and the two phase theory of socialism whereby the real emancipation of the working class is put into the indefinite future. Thus he explicitly rejected the elements of Marxism which separate it from anarchism.

Korsch's life's work is both an exposition and a critique of Marxism from a political position close to anarchism. Although, as Korsch himself showed, Marxism is not sufficient for a modern revolutionary movement, a study of Korsch's own Marxism allows one to preserve the best elements of the heritage of the classical workers' movement.

## **Footnotes**

1. While this was certainly true at the time this article was written, in the interim several collections of Korsch's works have appeared in English. See especially the special issue of *Telos* devoted to Korsch and Douglas Kellner's Korsch anthology.

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The pursuit of revolutionary struggle by what Marxism and Philosophy called an "ideological dictatorship" is in three ways different from the system of intellectual oppression established in Russia today in the name of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." First of all, it is a dictatorship of the proletariat and not over the proletariat. Secondly, it is a dictatorship of a class and not of a party or party leadership. Thirdly and most importantly, as a revolutionary dictatorship it is one element only of that radical process of social overthrow which by suppressing classes and class contradictions creates the preconditions for a 'withering away of the State,' and thereby the end of all ideological constraint. The essential purpose of an 'ideological dictatorship' in this sense is to abolish its own material and ideological causes and thereby to make its own existence unnecessary and impossible. From the very first day, this genuine proletarian dictatorship will be distinguished from any false imitation of it by its creation of the conditions of intellectual freedom not only for 'all' workers but for 'each individual' worker. Despite the alleged 'democracy' and 'freedom of thought' in bourgeois society, this freedom has never been enjoyed anywhere by the wage slaves who suffer its physical and spiritual oppression. This is what concretely defines the Marxist concept of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. With it disappears the otherwise apparent contradiction between a call for 'ideological dictatorship,' and the essentially critical and revolutionary nature of the method and outlook of Communism. Socialism, both in its ends and its means, is a struggle to realize freedom.

Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, Pages 125 and 126